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AUTHOR Kagan, Sharon L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores, from the perspective of a local practitioner, phases and effects of implementing a national education demonstration project at the local level. The pivotal role of the locality, its history and its economic realities, is emphasized. Drawing from her experience in planning and implementing a demonstration effort in a northeastern U.S. community, the author cites three difficulties involved in the demonstration project: (1) the illusion of immediate change: (2) the effect of the evaluation study: and (3) the dissonance in goals and time frame between local and national orientations. Based on relevant literature as well as on the author's personal experiences, it is concluded that: (1) the principal is the most important force in enacting a demonstration effort: (2) demonstration programs go through several predictable developmental phases (readiness, high activity, leveling off, and permanent change) that vary in intensity and duration from project to project: (3) if innovation programs are to be effective, they must be more targeted: and (4) while not able to accomplish all the specified tasks, demonstration programs are important contributions to the knowledge base that informs policy. (Author/APM)

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When Push Comes to Shove:

Enacting Demonstration Programs at the Local Level

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National demonstration programs, while conceived at the federal level, are enacted in selected local settings, each of which has its own cast of characters and its unique production requirements. The purpose of this presentation is to explore, from the local perspective, the patterns and effects of implementing a national demonstration at the local level.

A review of the literature on federal innovation programs indicates that there has been somewhat of a shift in acknowledging the role of the local setting. In the early days of federal involvement in education, the local role was underestimated and undervalued. A review of early ESEA Title I guidelines indicates that goals as well as detailed operational procedures were specified from the federal level. This effort to proscribe the planning process, in its adherence to detail, obfiscated the primary goals of the program. (Davies, 1978). More recently, as our collective experience has expanded, there is a growing recognition that federal programs, in general, and educational demonstration programs, in particular, must respect local histories, and the political and economic realities that shape the setting.

Recognition of the pivotal role of the locality in demonstration efforts can be evidenced as a unifying thread throughout the work of theorists and practitioners on educational change. John Goodlad calls the school, the unit of change. Jesse Jackson, in his operation PUSH, essentially a highly structured model, provides for local adaptation in the EXCEL Program.

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Significantly, the Rand Report in its study, "Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change", reported that whether or not federal investments made a difference was "largely determined by local choices and by local institutional characteristics ...The local institutional setting was by far the most important factor in determining project outcomes". Given the decentralized structure of educational decision-making in America, this should not be a surprise. The influence of the federal government in local school affairs is predicated on a set of convictions that supports local consent, and the preservation of the reality of local control.

My perspective in this presentation is that of a local practitioner, one who, in conjunction with numerous staff and parents, had the responsibility for planning and implementing a demonstration effort in a northeastern community. Unlike other demonstration programs that have focused on either the implementation of new curricula or the creation of totally new settings, this effort worked to develop continuity between two existing systems, Head Start and the public schools.

The experiences of our site, one of twelve in the county, are not precisely those of other sites, yet there are instructive parallels that emerge from distinct local experiences. In our district, like many others, involvement in the national demonstration effort was greeted enthusiastically. The goals of the demonstration program would benefit children, staff, families and community. The school district, given this impetus, would reap untold benefits; a new curriculum, more parent involvement, better home-school-community relations. The prospects were genuinely exciting. There were a few individuals who, tainted by experience with other so-called "model programs," expressed vague concern. Undaunted, a large team of parents, staff, administrators and community representatives cooperatively undertook proposal development.

Because Washington solicited more proposals than it could fund, the selection process was competitive. Our team became engaged, quite unconsciously, in a marketing effort. Our ability to develop continuity needed to be "sold" to national, regional and state offices. As the local team contemplated all it hoped to do, little, if any, consideration was given to possible negative consequences. Euphoria escalated. We gained confidence in ourselves and in the Washington office. Their extensive experience in launching and managing demonstration efforts was manifest in a carefully conceived program. Rather than mandating all program activities, the funding source developed guidelines that were considered a "framework for change." Even a planning year was provided. Although comprehensive, the demonstration effort seemed eminently reasonable.

Reasonable is precisely the correct word. We were jubilant in being selected, and yet, we were terribly aware that there were many unknowns. First, we wondered if and how the relationship between project and non-project schools in the district would be altered. Second, we questioned the process and the impact of being part of longitudinal evaluation. And third, and perhaps most important, we contemplated possible tension points in the emerging interface of the demonstration project and local district. This last concern lead to a wide range of questions: How tractable would the schools be? How much parent involvement would the district tolerate?

At the outset, these questions were formed in the most rudimentary sense, but with the actual arrival of the award, they became concrete. Case studies of educational innovations, for example; Gross, Gracquinta, Bernstein (1971) and Smith & Keith (1971) provided a good overview. Immediately after being selected, it became clear that the project schools would form, out of necessity, a unique subculture within the school district. Project schools had rules (i.e., guidelines) and resources (i.e., money and staff) that

clearly distinguished them from non-project schools. To meet the goals of the demonstration effort, project schools were exempted from several district-wide requirements. Project schools developed a sense of being "tapped" as the "chosen ones". As the sub-culture mystique intensified, non-project schools developed expectations of change. In reality, though, change was slow. The discrepancy between what was, and what seemed to be, created a facade. Renown visitors, newspaper articles and national conferences all contributed to a sense of significance. But to those inside, their accomplishments, however great, could not match the world's expectations. Theirs was an illusion of grandeur, intensified by a glamorous facade.

Another concern was the impact of the evaluation. While local program staff were aware that a national evaluation accompanied the project, we were not sure what the evaluation would entail and, more significantly, how it would affect project momentum or direction. In itself, the evaluation did not prove overwhelmingly cumbersome. The relationship between the evaluation contractor and the local sites was positive. Nonetheless, there were unanticipated outcomes. By being interviewed, case studied and asked to document virtually every activity, the illusion of grandeur was supported. After all, only important people who did important things were worthy of all this fuss, not to mention all this expense. One evaluation report noted (High Scope, Interim Report VII, Volume I, - August, 1977) "Evaluators often like to believe that they are a benign presence that has no effect on the operations of program, or at worst a semi-annual nuisance..." But the evaluators' very presence contributed to the sense of importance of the mission. In addition, by simply asking questions about what was done or why it was done, the evaluator caused program staff to critically consider their actions. In some cases, the asking of an objective question altered staff perspectives

totally. We came to learn that the evaluation was never neutral, but rather a potent force in modifying program and personal actions.

Perhaps the most important concern was the actual modifiability of the school district. When push came to shove, how much could a demonstration program really alter the modus operandi of a bureaucratic structure? Some tension is inherent as divergent visions of "what should be" are created and implemented. Staff have divided loyalty between adhering to the integrity of the innovation and the needs of the local school district. Though symbiotic, the missions of the program planners in Washington are not equivalent to those of district personnel. Washington staff are interested in improving service delivery, certainly, but are more invested in broad outcomes as they may inform future policy and program decisions. Local implementors, while concerned about future policy, are preoccupied with present service delivery.

In addition to basically divergent missions, there is a discordance between local and national perspectives of time. Given the force of a demonstration program, it is anticipated that change will occur rapidly. Perhaps because of the limited life of a demonstration project, Washington staff tend to accelerate time frames so that, for example, monthly records of changes were required. The school districts, however, conceptualize change far more gradually. From the local perspective, education will continue long after the demonstration dies, hence the urgency is mitigated.

These preliminary findings: (1) existence of the illusions of grandeur facade, (2) effect of the evaluation study and (3) disonance in mission and time perspective between local and national orientations were only beginnings of our learning about the process, players and with that would shape our demonstration effort. In some cases, our experiences directly paralled the literature, and in other instances, they deviated markedly from what we had expected.

For example, our work boldly supports the potency of the principal as the single most important force in enacting a demonstration effort. This project involved four schools. The degree of program implementation was directly correlated to the principal's personal commitment to the project. That is, the school in which the program was best implemented was principaled by the most ardent supporter of the project.

Second, our experience supported the emerging concept of predictable stages. We found that the demonstration program passed through four developmental phases: 1) readiness, 2) high activity, 3) leveling-off, and 4) permanent change. During the readiness phase, we prepared for our involvement. Assessments, formal and informal, were taken and accommodations were made. During high activity, the second phase, there was a noticeable burst of enthusiasm. Activity in this stage flourished and focused on what Lieberman (1977) terms "developmental mechanisms." For example, by-laws, newsletters and handbooks, were created. What was deemed important was the development of items, processes or services, that validated the projects existence. In retrospect, an important task of this phase was preparing for Phase III, leveling-off. Leveling-off was signaled by signs of significant staff and parent turnover. Turnover was due in part to "burn-out" and to manifestations of "backlash." Whatever the cause, it was a phase characterized by serious reappraisal and vulnerability for the demonstration effort. Through the leveling-off phase, structures developed during high activity were tested. Those that survived became a part of the school repetoire, and lead to the final phase - permanent change.

What remains from a demonstration effort warrants serious consideration. Institutionalized aspects of the innovation may be visible (i.e., like a curriculum modification) or less tangible (i.e., school climate improvement). They may remain in precisely the form in which they was initiated or more

likely, they will be modified or adapted to the school or district needs. Whatever the case, it seems fairly certain the institutional change must not be left to mere happenstance, but must be carefully orchestrated and systematically studied.

While our experience supports the existence of developmental phases, we suspect that they vary in duration and in intensity from project to project. We hypthesize that rate and intensity are modified by site specific events and regularities. Additionally, there seems to be a period in the life of demonstration, usually during leveling-off, when the demonstration is particularly vulnerable, when the strength of the district can topple a frail program. Although much of the literature has emphasized the importance of the initiation phase, our experience indicates that the natural leveling-off phase warrants additional study and support. Understanding that the demonstration project passes through stages and that some stages, as in human development, are more difficult, should enable program planners as well as Washington demonstration staff to allocate support resources accordingly.

In addressing the nature of the relationship between the demonstration program and the district, Milbrey McLaughlin has advanced a most appealing concept of mutual adaptation. Herein, the innovation causes changes in the setting and the setting is changed by the presence of the innovation. Mutual adaptation is a helpful construct, theoretically and practically. Yet, it must not be taken to imply that the innovation and the local setting are changed in <u>equal</u> amounts. Rather, there is a constant fluctuation in the process of adaptation, a fluctuation wich may paralell the phases. For example, our experience indicated that in early phases, the district was more pliant, more adaptive to the innovation. In the leveling-off stage, as the project began to phase-down, local adaptation decreased markedly. In fact, district adaptation decreased to the point where those affiliated with the

program maintained firmly that the weight of school reality was far stronger than the weight of the demonstration effort.

Over the years, our collective body of knowledge has grown so that we understand much more about how demonstrations can and do work, how rewards can and must be structured in, how teachers, parents, program providers and program recipients must plan collaboratively, and how time must be provided for planning. Yet in spite of clear directives, demonstration efforts aimed at altering basic organizational patterns have had only marginal effects, particularly when outcomes are contrasted with initial goals. This leads us to question if the scope is too broad or if the existing realities are too imbedded to alter? Elements of both appear to be operative.

Innovation programs, if they are to actually demonstrate effects, must be more targeted. Programs with diffuse goals must be trimmed so that expectations are attainable. Asking locals to completely alter operational patterns endemic to the institution is difficult, particularly in a five-year project. We must recognize that demonstration programs exact excruciating tolls from local leaders and must develop mechanisms that will provision for staff turnover and burn-out. We must begin to systematically use the knowledge accumulated from our rich research tradition. Let us accept Etzioni's theory of gradualism. Let us use Sarason's notion of pre-history. For example, when given a planning year, local sites should not be encouraged to merely conduct a needs assessment. Sites must be encouraged to incorporate an understanding of historical regularities as a routine part of a planning process. Only then will a needs assessment exist in context. We must understand that, because of their strong rootedness in local history, project results may not be generalizable. We must search for effective processes given extant conditions. And we must remember the very real fact that local perspectives are substantially different from national perspectives.

Finally, we must acknowledge that demonstration programs, while not able to accomplish all the specified tasks, are important contributors to the knowledge base with which policy may be informed. When push comes to shove, when the innovation comes to the local setting via a demonstration effort, change, however marginal, can be productive and instructive.

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